

VZCZCXRO4774
OO RUEHIK RUEHYG
DE RUEHTC #1236/01 1521411
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 011411Z JUN 06
FM AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5893
INFO RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE
RUEHAT/AMCONSUL AMSTERDAM 0921

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 THE HAGUE 001236

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [NL](#)
SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/ELECTIONS: VVD PLAYS IT SAFE

REFS: A. THE HAGUE 1141

[1](#)B. THE HAGUE 1109

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[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In an upset victory announced May 31, State Secretary for Education Mark Rutte defeated Immigration Minister Rita Verdonk in the contest to lead the Dutch Liberal Party (VVD) into the next election. While polls had consistently shown Verdonk in the lead, Rutte's popularity among the party leadership, and concerns about Verdonk's polarizing approach, ultimately led to his victory. Verdonk squelched speculation that she might leave the VVD with a gracious concession speech announcing her full support of Rutte and the VVD. She will remain a force to be reckoned with, however, given her popularity among rank-and-file VVD members and broader populist appeal on the right side of the political spectrum. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) Contrary to expectations fueled by inaccurate polling, members of the conservative Dutch Liberal Party (VVD) have chosen State Secretary for Education Mark Rutte over Minister of Immigration Rita Verdonk to lead the party into the 2007 parliamentary elections. On May 31, VVD party chairman Jan Van Zanen announced the results of the VVD's first-ever internal primary showing Rutte with 51.5 percent, Verdonk with 45.5 percent, and outsider Jenneke Veenendaal a mere 3 percent of the vote. About 29,000 of the 40,000 VVD members had cast their vote post or e-mail from May 1 until May 25.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Although Rutte clearly enjoyed more support than Verdonk among the party leadership-- especially after Verdonk's controversial handling of fellow VVD Ayaan Hirsi Ali's nationality issue (reftels) -- Verdonk consistently polled higher than Rutte during the campaign in media surveys. Verdonk's popularity remains high among rank-and-file VVD members, as well as voters further to the right of the political spectrum. In her concession speech, however, Verdonk squelched speculation that she might leave the VVD by expressing full support for Rutte and describing herself as his "running mate" -- i.e., she will hold the number two position on the VVD electoral list -- in a joint effort to make the VVD the largest party in Parliament. She did, however, note that she had learned a painful lesson about the unreliability of Dutch media polls.

[1](#)4. (U) For his part, Rutte appeared visibly surprised by the results. In his acceptance speech, he made clear his top priority would be to heal the rifts within the VVD and began the process of reaching out to Verdonk's supporters by stressing that "together we will make the VVD big." Senior VVD members echoed the theme of reconciliation and emphasized the need for Verdonk and Rutte to work as a "tandem." VVD minister Dekker, a Verdonk supporter, stressed that "We will close ranks and keep everyone on

board." Several prominent VVD figures, however, could barely hide their relief that they would not have to face elections under the leadership of a polarizing figure like Rita Verdonk. Defense Minister Kamp, for example, described Mark Rutte's election as "a dream start" to the campaign.

15. (SBU) In practical terms, the next step will be for Rutte to give up his Cabinet position to assume the leadership of the VVD faction in parliament. In that position he will be in a better position to influence the selection of VVD candidates and the development of the VVD electoral platform. Verdonk will remain in the Cabinet -- at least for now; it is not known who will replace Rutte as State Secretary for Education.

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COMMENT:

16. (SBU) The VVD party leadership overwhelmingly favored Rutte over Verdonk because they saw him as a relatively non-controversial, potentially unifying figure in a badly divided party. Although young and dynamic by Dutch standards, he lacks Verdonk's populist appeal and is unlikely to excite an increasingly anti-establishment electorate. Indeed, with his boyish haircut, thick glasses, and open-necked shirt, he sometimes comes across -- unfortunately -- as a mix between current Prime Minister Jan Pieter Balkenende and the head of the opposition Labor Party, Wouter Bos.

17. (SBU) On the other hand, Rutte's election no doubt came as a huge relief to VVD's coalition partners in the Balkenende government. Media reports in recent days had speculated that a Verdonk victory might have led quickly to a collapse of the government. With Rutte in charge, it is much more likely that VVD will remain in the coalition -- Verdonk's plans, of course, are always a subject of speculation -- long enough to allow the May 2007 elections

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to proceed as planned.

18. (SBU) Rutte's first major challenge will be to reunite and rebuild a party badly divided over the Hirsi Ali episode and other issues. He is expected to push the VVD toward the center of the political spectrum, both in order to pull votes away from PvdA and D66 and to position the party to become a credible coalition partner in the next government. At the same time, however, Verdonk's continuing appeal on the right -- including almost half of the voting VVD members -- means that she remains a significant force to be reckoned with. It also means that Rutte cannot afford to ignore the issues that she stands for, i.e. security and integration of Muslims.

Arnall